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5 January 198320**REVIEW & OUTLOOK****Tass and the Pope**

Amid the growing conviction that Bulgaria really did plot to kill the pope, Tass, the official Soviet news agency, has chosen a strange way to defend the reputation of the Soviet Union. It issues perfunctory denials that the assassin's trail stretches from St. Peter's Square to Bulgaria to the KGB to Chairman Andropov. Then it adds that, anyway, the pope got what he deserved.

The Vatican, said Tass in a dispatch last week, is conducting "subversive activity" against the communist countries of Eastern Europe. The Vatican, Tass charges, originated Solidarity; and it uses religious propaganda "to justify the inviolability of the capitalist system." Quoting an article in a journal published by the Communist Party's Central Committee, Tass even attacked Pope John Paul II by name. Compared to his predecessor, it said, he takes "a much more conservative and rigid position vis-a-vis the socialist world." The Vatican, concluded Tass, is under the influence of the "aggressive designs of imperialism."

The timing of this attack seems designed to raise eyebrows. While Western intelligence struggles to avoid implicating the communist world in the shooting of the pope, Moscow nonchalantly admits to the motive. Far from distancing itself from aggressive designs on the pontiff, it associates itself with them.

The Soviets seem to be saying we don't mind whether or not you think

we ordered the shooting. In fact, in many ways we'd prefer that you did.

There are suggestions of the same attitude in some parts of the "yellow rain" episode. Soviet proxies staged a mycotoxin attack in Cambodia just when a U.N. investigating team was across the border in Thailand. The brazenness of the timing adds a threatening flip to the already serious implication of the actual deed. Far from worrying about the shocked reaction of Western opinion, the Soviets could be using these crimes to manipulate it.

This brazen approach to propaganda is not unprecedented; similar tactics were used to play on Western psychology by Hitler in the 1930s. Threat alternates with peace offensive. First comes the hint of horrible deeds and then comes the sigh of relief. The deeds can be as horrible as you like because the West will be all the more willing to rationalize them away and all the more eager to grasp at the hope you're really a nice guy after all.

These tactics can't be used forever, as the late Hitler found out, but sometimes they can be spectacularly successful. Watching the "yellow rain" developments, hearing rumors of Soviet missile tests that may violate the strategic arms agreements and now reading Tass on the pope, we have to worry that Mr. Andropov is playing a similar hand today, and wonder how far he may get.